DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 724 EA 008 273

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TITLE Your Board's Responsibility for Curriculum.
PUB DATE 10 Apr 76
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (36th, San Francisco, California, April 10-13, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board Administrator Relationship; *Board of Education Role; Community Surveys; *Curriculum; Curriculum Development; Curriculum Evaluation; Definitions; Elementary Secondary Education; *Needs Assessment

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the school board's responsibility for curriculum matters and attacks the traditional view that the school board should only decide policy matters, while the superintendent should administer that policy. The author defines curriculum as everything that goes on in the schools and argues that it is the board's responsibility to ensure the reliability and validity of the curriculum. This requires active board involvement in so-called administrative matters; otherwise, the board is limited to simply ratifying decisions of the district's administrators. In conclusion, the author discusses the process of needs assessment and suggests that needs assessment should be an important part of the school board's duties. Included as an appendix is a copy of a "Community Survey of Educational Goals" that was part of a needs assessment effort in a New York school district. (JG)

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1976 NSBA CONVENTION/SAN FRANCISCO, APRIL 10-13, 1976
SPEAKER English CLINIC NO. A-15 PROGRAM p. 26

ED123724

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"Your Board's Responsibility for Curriculum"

Clinic Number A-15

Annual Convention Clinic Session
National School Boards Association
San Francisco, California
April 10, 1976

EA 008 275

YOUR BOARD'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR CURRICULUM

A curriculum is a decision. As a decision it represents a choice made upon criteria, that is, somebody decided that the school, a teacher, the students, would do this instead of something else. Any decision made by people about what a school should or will do, what a teacher will teach or what students should learn, is engaging in curriculum development.

School people, board members, administrators, teachers, make decisions all the time. We make decisions because we are charged with the responsibility to do something with students in a place called school. School by definition is limiting. In fact, school represents a societal decision that certain codified experiences or outcomes must happen each generation. Sometimes these codified experiences are formal (written) and sometimes they are informal (unwritten). But they exist. For any given society to continue to survive it must improve upon pure chance that survival will occur. School represents an effort to improve upon mere randomness that each succeeding generation will acquire those traits, concepts or skills that will enable a society to survive. School, therefore, is represented as a series of social decisions. We can't trust chance, so we build a school.

A curriculum is a set of codifications about what should go on in schools, i.e., what students should learn, what teachers should teach, and how time and space should be shaped to best facilitate what should go on. If people lived forever and we had no resource limitations we could abolish schools everywhere. Each society would, therefore, have to cease worrying about improving upon chance for its ability to survive.

In most cases boards are not even aware of the options or criteria by which the professional staff is asking them to ratify a previous decision. Only in the boardest possible sense do most boards engage in decision making about curriculum.

Anything that could go on in schools could be the curriculum. What does go on in schools is the real curriculum. Decisions made about what schools don't do or shouldn't teach or what students shouldn't learn, are curricular decisions. Sometimes, most often, they are rarely discussed, and too often boards don't make them.

A board must not only be concerned about what is taught and learned, but why what is being taught and/or learned should be learned among all of the things that might be taught and learned. This is essentially a question of validity. When a board can specify why a decision has been made over content and/or learning environment instead of an infinite number of other combinations and configurations, it approaches the task of determining curricular validity.

The question which Boards ask more often than those affiliated with validity are those associated with reliability. Reliability is determined by measures or consistency once it has been decided what is to be taught and/or learned. Questions of overlap, sequence and scope are affiliated with reliability. The degree of continuity from grade to grade, subject area to subject area, from school to school, and the degree of variability permitted, revolve around reliability.

If a board cannot specify what parameters of continuity are required and variability permitted, it has essentially no control over the shaping of curriculum. If it cannot specify how the validity of the curriculum was determined, it has no control over curricular content. Control as represented in decision making has passed from

the board to the staff or to the test makers. The board does not decide, it ratifies somebody else's decision.

The Strawman of Policy and Aministration

Frequently boards and superintendents become embroiled over questions of policy and administration. It is said by all those involved that boards should decide policy and superintendents should administer that policy. The only trouble with this is that it doesn't work in practice, and inhibits boards from being effective and the school system from improving pupil performance. This board/superintendent cleavage was invented at the turn of the century as a strategy to eliminate board standing committees and corrupt ward politics. It was invented by those interested in creating the superintendency a role. I don't believe there is any way a board can be effective as a decision-making body without getting into what has been traditionally called administration. Administration is decision making about options. It means means should be consistent with ends, and it is the board's responsibility to ensure there is a relationship of means to ends. In curriculum it is the board's legal responsibility to insure both reliability and validity. To do this requires in-depth problem solving without artificial lines to insure job security of the superintendent. A board of education is both legislative, executive and judicial all wrapped up into one group. It must insure the validity and reliability of curriculum and take administrative steps which are appropriate to improve upon random chance that what is learned in schools is both appropriate and meaningful. What is appropriate is a question of validity. What is meaningful means determining the degree of continuity and variability desired and/or permitted in the curriculum.

Educators go to extremes to mask the tremendous amount of manipulation involved in this enterprise. We don't like to admit the degree to which consicous "shaping" goes on in schools. Somehow we find this acceptance contradictory to democratic ideals. Somehow there is the notion that putting the pieces together is all that is required and marvelous things will just happen. The failure of alternative schools who tried this approach are well-known. It is sort of a "spontaneous combustion" model of school.

We often find an educator who believes that all that is required is to present the widest variety of options and let students select that which is most meaningful. At a recent planning conference with an elementary school, the principal expressed the viewpoint that no values were more important than any others which is a contradiction in itself.

If we merely let each child select his own values from those which would be available in school, we have superimposed that value over one which denies selection and would force all students to learn one value. A school devoted to presenting pluralistic values would soon expel the value that the choice of alternative values should be eliminated. Any choice regarding values is therefore as arbitrary as any other. Pluralism is as arbitrary in this sense as any other value which may be contradictory.

Schools operate on choices. The failure to chose one implies that a decision is made. We don't function in a vacuum. Things will happen one way or another, but they will happen. It seems to me we must dispel the myth that the selection of certain values in schools is somehow antithetical to sound educational practice. A democratic society has a set of values which exclude other values from becoming paramount. If these values are clustered in a society's

schools for purposes of regeneration with the young, we are being manipulative by attempting to insure their adoption for each succeeding generation. Even trying to renege on our responsibilities to make decisions about the curriculum are ultimately decisions as binding as those we would have made facing the issues head on. We are in a position where action or the lack of action is binding as if made by an arbitrator.

The Curriculum Today

School curriculum today was never more in a state of disarray. Little has been abandoned and much has been adapted, adopted and superimposed over what went on before. In some cases we have differences, in others merely the inclusion of new language to cover old methods, content and expectations. The proliferation of "mini-courses" has proceeded at a fast pace in adding much without systematic forethought to the secondary curriculum under the assumption that whatever interests students is first and foremost the single and only criterion by which its validity is determined.

Indeed, the historic role of boards in dealing with curriculum is to ratify the choices of the professional staff and too often the staff has no other indicators of quality except limited subject area biases and no master plan to decide what should stay or go. Boards rarely have a set of criteria by which to select curricula or have the data to decide if any past decision about curriculum was any better than any other.

In many schools we find as much variability across any given grade level as we do from one grade level to the next. Curriculum guides, if they exist, are little help because they are not in terms which can be assessed and are statements of what "ought to be" rather than what is actually being taught or learned in the schools. The ability of a board to ascertain any aspect of its curriculum

is almost solely confined to standardized tests which are dubious indicators of quality or validity. In short, most boards do not deal with curriculum in any systematic way or in any other manner except periodic reivews of various courses or subject areas. Too often the curriculum is seen as an end itself rather than a means to achieve validated systemwide learning objectives. This is a classic confusion of means and ends. Unless a board can speak meaningfully to why this curriculum instead of some other, it has not properly conceptualized what a curriculum is really about or what it should deliver in terms of results. Under those circumstances it is impossible to meaningfully evaluate a curriculum.

One Approach: Needs Assessment

Many school systems are attempting to enter the curriculum picture in a more systematic way. They are attempting to develop sets of assessable and validated learning outcomes for their school systems. These are not philosophical statements or even a philosophy of education. Rather they are pragmatic indicators of what skills, knowledges, and attitudes students should receive as a minimal education "floor" of the school system. The development and validation of these outcomes is called needs assessment.

The steps of needs assessment are as follows:

(1) Develop educational goal statements;
(2) Refine educational goal statements into objectives;
(3) Develop objective or measurable indicators for each one;
(4) Validate these objectives and indicators via a consensus making approach from the important groups to be involved, i.e., parents, taxpapers, students and staff;
(5) Develop or buy assessment instruments;
(6) Compare the results of the assessment to desired objectives;
(7) Develop lists of preliminary "gaps" or "needs" between desired ends and current performance;
(8) Locate gaps in the current curriculum (must know what is now being taught);
(9) Determine which gaps must be closed first;
(10) Develop strategies to close gaps;
(11) Budget and implement strategies;
(12) Evaluate the effectiveness of each strategy by determining if the gap has been closed.

A curriculum is nothing more than a set of decisions (a strategy) or means to reach specified ends (objectives). In this process the board has a set of criteria to determine validity (the level of consensus of each of the groups involved in ranking and approving goals and measurement indicators) and criteria to determine if a curriculum is effective (did it close the gaps?).

Also within this process are the means to assess the administration, the teaching staff, the in-service training program, the school schedule, the adequacy of the budget in most categories, and the degree of professional diagnosis of why certain gaps have not been met (closed).

The entire process involves the Board in establishing the goals and the procedures for involvement, acting on consensus levels, and being provided the data for curricular assessment to weigh the effectiveness of any curriculum in the system and to select, augment or delete ineffective curricula in a way which is traditionally absent. The board assumes a much more direct and active posture in the development and assessment of school curricula.

Rather than spending its time writing educational philosophies which ignore the realities of day to day teaching and what is really happening in the schools, the board creates the mechanism for issuing directives which influence instructional decisions which can be followed and assessed.

Not everyone will be happy about the development of this capability. Many professionals will find this "intrusion" threatening. Many professionals simply don't trust the general public or a board in knowing what is good or bad in the schools anyway. There is rampant skepticism among professionals about the role of any board in such affairs as a matter of course. Under the current system which is non-accountable, it is hard to track down ineffective decisions. The loss of ambiguity will be threatening. Curricular gaps will be more

noticeable and public. It will be a wise board which will act upon such identification in a positive manner and use such information produced by a needs assessment to take salutary steps to improve things, without resorting to punishment as a first response.

Most people are doing the best job they know how. Many of the gaps in an educational program can be closed without any further expenditure of funds and without any other kind of addition. The mere process of clarifying expectations can produce the directions necessary to create a more effective school curriculum. It seems reasonable to conclude that the clearer the board makes those expectations the easier the staff can comply. One's personal actions can become congruent to the extent it is understood how they fit into the total picture. It is the board's responsibility to paint the picture in ways which are understood and understandable.

HASTINGS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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COMMUNITY SURVEY OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Dear Hastings Citizen:

As you undoubtedly know, the schools are being asked to do more and more, and at the same time are facing some very serious economic constraints. We would like your assistance in helping us to identify what is most important for our children to learn in school. We want to know what you feel is essential that students learn. While we would hope that our students would learn all the things listed in the enclosed survey, we recognize that with limited resources we must concentrate our energies on what is most important.

Would you take a few minutes to fill out the attached form and return it to us one of two ways; either by putting back into the mail (refolding the survey so that the first class business reply face on page three is outward), or by dropping the survey at one of five convenient locations in the village listed below.* This will save the school district 18¢ per returned survey.

In Part I of the survey we are asking you to rate nine educational goals ranking them high, medium or low in importance. In Part II we would like to know if you agree or disagree with the ways that the goals might be measured to show if students had learned them. For example, would "showing a knowledge of public health standards and practices," be acceptable evidence to you that a student had acquired, "the ability to maintain mental, physical and emotional health"? If you agree, then there are three levels of agreement shown. You would check the level of agreement that corresponds to your response. On-the-other-hand, you may disagree that this would be evidence that a student had learned, "the ability to maintain mental, physical and emotional health." In this case you would check "disagree" as your response. In this case your disagreement would tell us that we could not use this evidence as a basis for determining whether or not the educational goal had been reached by the school system.

In Part III of the survey we would like to know in your own words how you think the schools can be improved and in what areas we are now doing a good job. Finally your overall opinion of the school system can be indicated here as well.

We expect the results of this community survey to be presented to the Board of Education within the next several months. It will be used as a basis for evaluating the school curriculum.

Would you please return the survey no later than April 5, 1976 either by dropping it off at the designated points, or returning it in the mail by refolding the survey. We thank you very much for your assistance in helping us to determine what the educational goals of our school system should be in the future.

Very sincerely,

Fenwick W. English
Superintendent of Schools

P.S. For those adults in the same families who would like to fill out a separate survey, please call the Superintendent's Office, 478-2900, for additional copies.

*Community drop zones are Bob's Service Station (Warburton & North), Kupcheck's Liquor Store (584 Warburton), Good Yarns (535 Warburton), Jacobson's Drug Store (544 Warburton), and Mandrick's Market (483 Warburton at Washington).

COMMUNITY SURVEY OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Part I Goal Ranking

DIRECTIONS: Read each educational goal and then indicate by marking how important you think it should be in one of the three rankings possible for each educational goal.

YOUR RANKING OF GOAL IMPORTANCE			EDUCATIONAL GOAL
High	Medium	Low	By the time a student graduates from our high school he or she should have learned:
			1. How to get a job and/or how to go on to complete college.
			2. To appreciate and participate in a rich and varied cultural life.
			3. That he or she is a worthwhile person in his or her own right.
			4. The basic ideas and ways of thinking within the sciences and social sciences.
			5. The basic skills of communication and reasoning necessary to live a full and productive life.
			6. How to participate as an effective citizen and consumer in our society.
			7. To develop competence in the process of developing values in order to appreciate and respect the rights of others.
			8. The ability to maintain mental, physical and emotional health.
			9. How to engage in learning as a life long process.
			10. (Write in your choice if not shown above and then enter its rank)_____

Part II Measurement Indicators (What We Will Test)

DIRECTIONS: After ranking the goals in Part I, now indicate which (one or more) of the many ways the goal could be measured as learned by students would be acceptable to you.

YOUR OPINION				
AGREE			DISAGREE	
High	Medium	Low		GOAL 1: How to get a job and/or how to go on to complete college by being able to:
				A. Know a variety of work opportunities available.
				B. Have the necessary employable skills to get a job and the work habits to keep a job.
				C. Apply and be accepted to college of his or her choice.
				D. Enroll and complete further occupational training.
				E. Understand the dignity of all forms of human labor.
AGREE			DISAGREE	GOAL 2: To appreciate and participate in a rich and varied cultural life by being able to:
High	Medium	Low		A. Understand and value a variety of artistic, musical, literary and dramatic forms as methods of human expression.
				B. Locate and use cultural resources such as libraries, museums and historical sites.
				C. Engage in a variety of cultural activities to express him or herself.
AGREE			DISAGREE	GOAL 3: That he or she is a worthwhile person in his or her own right by being able to:
High	Medium	Low		A. Feel confident about going into new fields.
				B. See himself or herself positively.
				C. Cope with criticism and accept it if valid.
				D. Use both successes and failures as learning experiences.
				E. Set realistic personal goals.

(Go on to complete survey at bottom of next page)

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YOUR OPINION				
AGREE			DISAGREE	
High	Medium	Low		
				GOAL 4: The basic ideas and ways of thinking within the sciences and social sciences by being able to: A. Show knowledge of the basic methods of inquiry in each field. B. Develop skill in handling the basic ideas and terms within each subject and understand how they developed historically. C. Understand the scientific method and the impact of scientific advances. D. Show knowledge of the family as a basic unit of our society.
AGREE			DISAGREE	
High	Medium	Low		
				GOAL 5: The basic skills of communication and reasoning necessary to live a full and productive life by being able to: A. Read with comprehension, speak and write clearly. B. Understand and be able to perform basic mathematical operations. C. Think creatively and critically in order to analyze problems.
AGREE			DISAGREE	
High	Medium	Low		
				GOAL 6: How to participate as an effective citizen and consumer in our society by being able to: A. Show an understanding of our legal, economic and political processes. B. Explain our historical heritage as a democratic people. C. Participate actively in the life of the community and nation. D. Show an understanding of national and international problems.
AGREE			DISAGREE	
High	Medium	Low		
				GOAL 7: To develop the competence in the process of developing values in order to appreciate and respect the rights of others by being able to: A. Understand and compare his or her values with others B. Understand and relate to other social, racial, religious groups. C. Live peaceably in a community with groups possessing many values D. Avoid imposing his or her own values upon others. E. Appreciate and use the common standards of social courtesy.

(Go on to next page and then re-fold this survey so that the business reply envelope shown above is facing out. Drop in letter box or return at designated "drops" in the community mentioned in letter)

YOUR OPINION				
AGREE			DISAGREE	GOAL 8: The ability to maintain mental, physical and emotional health by being able to:
High	Medium	Low		
				A. Show knowledge of good health habits to maintain physical/ mental health.
				B. Show knowledge of problems caused by drug addiction and other harmful activities upon physical and emotional well-being.
				C. Show knowledge of public health standards and practices.
				D. Participate cooperatively in team sport activities.
				E. Understand when competition or cooperation are called for.
				F. Show knowledge of general safety principles and practices
AGREE			DISAGREE	GOAL 9: How to engage in learning as a life long process by being able to:
High	Medium	Low		
				A. Know where to obtain information on most problems.
				B. Participate and seek a variety of learning activities.

Part III Open Response

DIRECTIONS: Feel free in your own words to indicate how you think the schools may be improved and in what areas the schools are doing a good job. Please use the space below.

What is your overall opinion of the schools?

_____ High _____ Medium _____ Low _____ Undecided

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